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THE VALUE OF A HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

BY MRS. M. BURTON WILLIAMSON.

(Read Oct. 12, 1896.)

Before trying to answer the question, "what is the value of a Historical Society?" it might be well to turn our attention elsewhere, to see what our Government, and the different States, are doing in the line of history. In an address before the American Historical Association, composed of several hundred members, representing some of the most learned men of the nation, Mr. A. Howard Clark, said in regard to "What the United States has done for History," that the Government had "spent more than \$2,000,000 in the acquisition and publication of records pertaining alone to our country's history. It has spent many millions more in the erection of historical memorials, in preservation of historical places, and in celebration of historical events, and, is annually expending more than \$250,000 directly in behalf of American history." No nation ever undertook such a magnificent historical work as is now approaching completion under charge of most efficient bureaus of the War and Navy Department."

What are the various States doing in sustaining historical societies? According to the latest report of the American Historical Association, there are now over 300 historical societies. These are distributed all over the United States from Maine to California. Of this number, Massachusetts claims 62, New York 57, and our own State 4, known as the California Historical Society, (San Francisco;) Pioneer Association, (of the Counties of Marin, Napa, Lake and Mendocino Petaluma;) Society of California Pioneers, (San Francisco;) and the Historical Society of Southern California, (Los Angeles.) But two of these are really Historical Societies. A brief outline of the origin of the Historical Society of Southern California may not be inappropriate here:

The idea of organizing a Historical Society in Southern California was first originated by Judge Noah Levering, in 1883. Judge Levering was at that time and had for a number of years been an active member of the Iowa State Historical Society, and fully appreciating the value of a Historical Society to a community, began an active canvass for members to found one in his adopted home. His success at first was not encouraging-but by persevering, he at length secured enough names to warrant him in making a call of a meeting for the purpose of organizing. The first meeting appointed at the State Normal Building was not a success, only four persons reporting. The next meeting held on November 1, 1883, in the City Court Room, Temple Block, was more successful. The following named

gentlemen were present and enrolled themselves members of the society: Col. J. J. Warner, Noah Levering, H. D. Barrows, Gen. John Mansfield, Prof. J. M. Guinn, Maj. C. N. Wilson, Ex-Gov. J. G. Downey, Prof. Ira More, J. B. Niles, A. Kohler, Don Antonio F. Coronel, George Hansen, A. J. Bradfield, Maj. E. W. Jones and Prof. Marcus Baker. Col. J. J. Warner was elected president and Maj. C. N. Wilson secretary. The society at first grew quite rapidly. It was something new—was popular—and a number of that class who are always on the lookout for something to benefit self joined, only to fall off when they found that to maintain a Historical Society required hard work, and constant outlay; and that there was no individual return except the satisfaction of having labored for the general good of the community.

The actual local value of our society to the community in which it is located can not be estimated in dollars and cents. In the thirteen years of its existence it has published nearly one thousand pages of original historical and scientific matter. Its publications have been widely circulated. They have found their way into the libraries of the leading historical, scientific and geographical societies, and into the libraries of the principal colleges and universities of the United States. In addition to these we have received requests for them from colleges and individuals in Europe, Australia and Canada.

The influence of our publications in directing attention to Southern California has no doubt been much greater than even its members are aware. This influence has been exerted upon the very best class of persons—the intelligent and educated.

Independent of any pecuniary profit that may accrue to the community or to the individual, is the educational influence that such a society exerts. Every year the value of the study of history is more and more recognized by our leading educational institutions. To the published works of the local historical societies, institutions and individual historians must look for valuable aid in historical work.

Although history is defined as the record of consecutive public events, yet, there are many departments in literature that contribute to its value—annals, chronicles, biographies, autobiographies, travels, the daily press, all furnish materials for the historian. We have passed the primitive period of mentality when printed matter is accepted as authoritative, unless verified by some other testimony, or some other than cold type authority, even if the matter does *prima facie* appear plausible. We know that many valuable facts are surrounded by an accumulation of unreliable statements, and here is where a wide awake society can help posterity by winnowing out the chaff and revealing the wheat; by eliminating fiction from truth. This should be done with much of the current printed material gathered for historical work.

This means work, and hard work, for it can only be done by comparing records, tracing events and following out sequences. Our society contains men who are qualified for such a task, and we have valuable records, but the difficulty of consulting these records holds much of this work in abeyance. Shall we wait until those are qualified to discern the true from the false, in the history of past events, are no longer with us?

There is a good deal of historical data existing in the memory of our oldest citizens and pioneers. Many valuable historical events are remembered by our Spanish and Mexican citizens and some of our members are sufficiently versed in the Spanish language to bring to us reminiscences of our oldest inhabitants; and, many of our pioneers remember the inception and early growth of events that are now culminating around us.

What a rich field for historical data is before us! Think of Massachusetts with 62 historical societies, while only one incorporated historical society exists in Southern California, and that one is allowed to suffer for want of means! Then we have abundant material for history and plenty of work for a historical society. Compare the limited amount of historical data not already written up in the older States which are able to maintain half a hundred societies, with the opportunities for collating history in Southern California!

Our local history furnishes us with unusual and interesting events. The landing of the Spanish navigators, the founding of the Missions by the fathers, the growth of Southern California during the Mexican regime, the finding of gold and the wild rush to California from all parts of the world, and finally the influx of people from all parts of the United States to California; furnish eras full of historical data. But, aside from this society, the general impression seems to prevail that the history of Southern California is of no value outside of the Missions. This shows how we, as a people, sacrifice that which is equally important, in the interest of the æsthetic. I would not be understood as disparaging the study of the Missions, no history would be complete without them, but would wish to be understood as in favor of granting to that era of our history only its due proportion of study as one of the most important subdivisions of our many sided history.

Few societies have labored under greater disadvantages, as a society, than the Historical Society of Southern California. For a time its accumulation of books, papers, letters, curios and so forth, were stored in the State Normal School Building in Los Angeles, but were eventually crowded out to make more room for the school; the County Supervisors allowed us the use of a large room in the fourth story of the Court House, but finally that room was needed by the County, and the Society's valuable accumulations were conveyed to a gallery of one of the court rooms, where they are

now stored away. I use the term "stored" advisedly, for the accumulations exceed the space and the cases necessary for any display, or for reference. This wealth of material and the interesting and valuable annuals yearly distributed by the Society show unusual activity for the size of its membership. And all this under the most discouraging circumstances, for what is there to encourage the collating of facts if their preservation is not secured? You see we need a headquarters fully equipped with suitable cases and drawers. To do this money is necessary. There is abundance of means in Southern California were we all as interested in the history of our State as we are in its prosperity commercially. The intellectual activity of any people is shown by its interest in whatever pertains to its origin and growth of events; for, every generation is a constituent part of a consecutive series of events from anterior times. The political and economic problems of to day are the developments of earlier problems, and, the issues of the present are laying the foundation for future social problems. Is history of no importance to us?

It must be said, however, that our population here is very largely made up of immigrants from other States. They have come with little, or no knowledge relative to our local history. Their interests have been centered elsewhere. Our history does not appeal to them until they have become identified with that history. It takes time to do this.

A place of meeting is, at the present, a question of vital importance. For some years the society held monthly meetings at the old City Hall on Second street, but, here the exigences of commerce and change of ownership of the buildings, have crowded us out. So we held our meetings in the office of the Police Judge, the environment was not sufficiently attractive to add to, and retain, other than historical students too much in love with the work to be critical of surroundings. A place of meeting that could also be a headquarters for our wealth of historical material is a desideratum just now.

With every cycle of time the value of the consecutive records of public events become greater, and in the light of such a fact is it not surprising that a society formed for the purpose of collating and preserving history should be hampered for means.

It may be said that an individual interested in the history of our section can work outside of a society. This is true, but, it is the exception, not the rule. As a rule we need the co-operation of others interested in the same line of work, for, collectively one dozen men and women can accomplish greater results than would be possible where individuals are not spurred on by the formation of a society and the association of others interested in the same pursuit. In the political and commercial world we find parties, clubs, and companies are formed for the accomplishment of certain objects possible only to combined efforts. For this reason, also,

clubs are formed for the discussion and advancement of economic, socialistic, educational and philanthropic aims. There is an inspiration in meeting with other workers in the same pursuit; new lines of investigation are presented and fallacies are corrected. We know this has often been proven in our Historical Society for the discussion of papers prepared and read before the Society has often brought other points to bear upon the subject and corrected fallacies that had crept in without the knowledge of the writer.

Why a Historical Society instead of some other form of literary organization, may be briefly stated; there is an inspiration in working with others, and more is accomplished. Persons not directly interested may become so by hearing papers read upon the subject, and many can help by becoming members and contributing towards the funds of the society in this way increasing historical literature. A historical society can collect and collate valuable papers that would not be offered to individuals as gifts; for the traditions and historical curios of a family are better preserved in the archives and museum of a responsible society, than if left without a custodian. Fallacies in current history can be corrected by members competent to do so.

It can be something more than a buoy, if it is a strong society; it can be like a pier or projecting wharf, a landing place for the ships of time to unload some of their cargo before they pass into the ocean of obscurity.

ERRATA.

Page 10,	line 16,	read Coronel; for Caronel
" 28,	" 1,	read: who were founders of families.
" 30,	" 1,	" cuera blanca.
" 30, 31	" —	" Ruiz for Ruis.
" 36,	" 34,	" conquista for conquesta.
" 49,	" 34,	" rancheria for rancharia.
" 59,	" 5,	" those who are qualified, etc.
" 60,	" 12,	" part for past.
" 61,	" 18,	" fallacies for follaces.
" 62,	" 6,	" Señora for Soñora.
" 63,	" 24,	" clung for cling.
" 67,	" 37,	" says for say.